

§ 278.1 Approval of retail food stores and wholesale food concerns.

(a) *Application.* Any firm desiring to participate or continue to be authorized in the program shall file an application as prescribed by FNS. Such an application shall contain information which will permit a determination to be made as to whether such an applicant qualifies, or continues to qualify, for authorization under the provisions of the program. FNS may require that a retail food store or wholesale food concern be visited to confirm eligibility for program participation prior to such store or concern being authorized or reauthorized in the program. Required visits shall be conducted by an authorized employee of the Department, a designee of the Secretary, or an official of the State or local government designated by the Secretary. FNS shall approve or deny the application within 45 days of receipt of a completed application. A completed application means that all information (other than an on-site visit) that FNS deems necessary in order to make a determination on the firm's application has been received. This information includes, but is not limited to, a completed application form, all information and documentation from the applicant, as well as any needed third-party verification and documentation.

(b) *Determination of authorization.* An applicant shall provide sufficient data and information on the nature and scope of the firm's business for FNS to determine whether the applicant's participation will further the purposes of the program. Upon request, an applicant shall provide documentation to FNS to verify information on the application. Such information may include, but is not limited to, State and local business licenses, Social Security cards, drivers' licenses, photographic identification cards, bills of sale, deeds, leases, sales contracts, State certificates of incorporation, sales records, invoice records and business-related tax records. Retail food stores and wholesale food concerns and other entities eligible for authorization also shall be required to sign a release form which will authorize FNS to verify all relevant business related tax filings with appropriate agencies. In addition,

they must obtain corroborating documentation from other sources as deemed necessary to ensure the legitimacy of applicant firms, as well as the accuracy of information provided by the stores and concerns. Failure to comply with any request for information or failure to sign a written release form shall result in denial of the application for authorization or withdrawal of a firm or concern from the program. In determining whether a firm qualifies for authorization, FNS shall consider all of the following:

(1) *The nature and extent of the food business conducted by the applicant—*(i) *Retail food store.* (A) An establishment or house-to-house trade route shall normally be considered to have food business of a nature and extent that will effectuate the purposes of the program if it sells food for home preparation and consumption and meets one of the following criteria: Offer for sale, on a continuous basis, a variety of qualifying foods in each of the four categories of staple foods as defined in § 271.2 of this chapter, including perishable foods in at least two of the categories (Criterion A); or have more than 50 percent of the total gross retail sales of the establishment or route in staple foods (Criterion B).

(B) A retail food store must meet eligibility determination factors which may be based on, but not limited to, visual inspection, sales records, purchase records, counting of stockkeeping units, or other inventory or accounting recordkeeping methods that are customary or reasonable in the retail food industry. In determining eligibility, such information may be requested for verification purposes, and failure to provide such documentation may result in denial or withdrawal from the program.

(ii) *Application of Criterion A.* In order to qualify under this criterion, firms shall:

(A) Offer for sale and normally display in a public area, qualifying staple food items on a continuous basis, evidenced by having, on any given day of operation, no fewer than three different varieties of food items in each of the four staple food categories. Documentation to determine if a firm stocks a sufficient amount of required

staple foods to offer them for sale on a continuous basis may be required in cases where it is not clear that the requirement has been met. Such documentation can be achieved through store visits and/or verifying information when requested. Failure to provide verifying information when requested or to cooperate with store visits shall result in the denial or withdrawal of authorization.

(B) Offer for sale perishable staple food items in at least two staple food categories. Perishable foods are items which are either frozen staple food items or fresh, unrefrigerated or refrigerated staple food items that will spoil or suffer significant deterioration in quality within 2-3 weeks; and

(C) Offer a variety of staple foods which means different types of foods, such as apples, cabbage, tomatoes, and squash in the fruit or vegetable staple food category, or milk, cheese, butter and yogurt in the dairy category. Variety of foods is not to be interpreted as different brands, different nutrient values, different varieties of packaging, or different package sizes. Similar processed food items with varying ingredients such as, but not limited to, sausages, breakfast cereals, milk, sliced breads, and cheeses, and similar unprocessed food items, such as, but not limited to, different varieties of apples, cabbage, tomatoes, or squash shall not each be considered as more than one staple food variety for the purpose of determining variety. Multiple ingredient food items intended for home preparation and consumption, such as, but not limited to, cold pizza, macaroni and cheese, soup, or frozen dinners, shall only be counted as one staple food variety each and will normally be included in the staple food category of the main ingredient as determined by the FNS.

(iii) *Application of Criterion B.* In order to qualify under this criterion, firms must have more than 50 percent of their total gross retail sales in staple food sales. Total gross retail sales must include all retail sales of a firm, including food and non-food merchandise, as well as services, such as rental fees, professional fees, and entertainment/sports/games income. However, a fee directly connected to the proc-

essing of staple foods, such as raw meat, poultry, or fish by the service provider, may be calculated as staple food sales under Criterion B.

(iv) *Ineligible firms.* Firms that do not meet the eligibility requirements in this section or that do not effectuate the purpose of the Food Stamp Program shall not be eligible for program participation. New applicant firms that are found to be ineligible will be denied authorization to participate in the program, and authorized retail food stores found to be ineligible will be withdrawn from program participation. Ineligible firms under this paragraph include, but are not limited to, stores selling only accessory foods, including spices, candy, soft drinks, tea, or coffee; ice cream vendors selling solely ice cream; and specialty doughnut shops or bakeries not selling bread. In addition, firms that are considered to be restaurants, that is, firms that have more than 50 percent of their total gross retail sales in hot and/or cold prepared foods not intended for home preparation and consumption, shall not qualify for participation as retail food stores under Criterion A or B. This includes firms that primarily sell prepared foods that are consumed on the premises or sold for carryout. Such firms may qualify, however, under the special restaurant programs that serve the elderly, disabled, and homeless populations, as set forth in paragraph (d) of this section.

(v) *Wholesale food concerns.* Wholesale food concerns, the primary business of which is the sale of eligible food at wholesale, and which meet the staple food requirements in paragraph (b) of this section, shall normally be considered to have adequate food business for the purposes of the program, provided such concerns meet the criteria specified in paragraph (c) of this section.

(vi) *Co-located wholesale food concerns.* No co-located wholesale/retail food concern with 50 percent or less of its total sales in retail food sales may be authorized to redeem food stamps unless it meets the criteria applicable to all retail firms and:

(A) It is a legitimate retail food outlet. Indicators which may establish to FNS that a firm is a legitimate retail

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food outlet include, but are not limited to, the following:

(1) The firm's marketing structure; as may be determined by factors such as, but not limited to:

(i) A retail business license;
(ii) The existence of sales tax records documenting retail food sales; and/or separate bookkeeping records; and

(2) The way the firm holds itself out to the public as evidenced by factors such as, but not limited to:

(i) The layout of the retail sales space;
(ii) The use of retail advertisements;
(iii) The posting of retail prices;
(iv) Offering specials to attract retail customers;
(v) Hours of operation for retail business;

(vi) Parking area for retail customers; and

(B) It has total annual retail food sales of at least \$250,000; or

(C) It is a legitimate retail outlet but fails to meet the requirements in paragraph (b)(1)(iv)(B) of this section, and not authorizing such a firm would cause hardship to food stamp households. Hardship would occur in any one of the following circumstances:

(1) Program recipients would have difficulty in finding authorized firms to accept their coupons for eligible food;

(2) Special ethnic foods would not otherwise be available to recipients; or

(3) Recipients would be deprived of an opportunity to take advantage of unusually low prices offered by the firm if no other authorized firm in the area offers the same types of food items at comparable prices.

(2) *The volume of coupon business which FNS may reasonably expect the firm to do.* The FNS officer in charge may consider such factors as the location of a store and previous food sales volumes in evaluating the ability of an applicant firm to attract food stamp business.

(3) *The business integrity and reputation of the applicant.* FNS shall deny the authorization of any firm from participation in the program for a period of time as specified in paragraph (k) of this section based on consideration of information regarding the business in-

tegrity and reputation of the firm as follows:

(i) Conviction of or civil judgment against the owners, officers or managers of the firm for:

(A) Commission of fraud or a criminal offense in connection with obtaining, attempting to obtain, or performing a public or private agreement or transaction;

(B) Commission of embezzlement, theft, forgery, bribery, falsification or destruction of records, making false statements, receiving stolen property, making false claims, or obstruction of justice; or

(C) Violation of Federal, State and/or local consumer protection laws or other laws relating to alcohol, tobacco, firearms, controlled substances, and/or gaming licenses;

(ii) Administrative findings by Federal, State or local officials that do not give rise to a conviction or civil judgment but for which a firm is removed from such a program, or the firm is not removed from the program but FNS determines a pattern exists (3 or more instances) evidencing a lack of business integrity on the part of the owners, officers or managers of the firm;

(iii) Evidence of an attempt by the firm to circumvent a period of disqualification, a civil money penalty or fine imposed for violations of the Food Stamp Act and program regulations;

(iv) Previous Food Stamp Program violations administratively and/or judicially established as having been committed by owners, officers, or managers of the firm for which a sanction had not been previously imposed and satisfied;

(v) Evidence of prior Food Stamp Program violations personally committed by the owner(s) or the officer(s) of the firm at one or more units of a multi-unit firm, or evidence of prior Food Stamp Program violations committed by management at other units of multi-unit firms which would indicate a lack of business integrity on the part of ownership and for which sanctions had not been previously imposed and satisfied; or

(vi) Commission of any other offense indicating a lack of business integrity or business honesty of owners, officers or managers of the firm that seriously

and directly affects the present responsibility of a person.

(4) *Bonding for firms with previous sanctions.* (i) If the applicant firm has been sanctioned for violations of this part, by withdrawal or disqualification from program participation, or by a civil money penalty, the FNS officer-in-charge shall, as a condition of future authorization, require the applicant to present a collateral bond which:

(A) Is issued by a bonding agent recognized under the law of the State in which the applicant is conducting business, and which is represented by a negotiable certificate only.

(B) Is payable to the Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture;

(C) Cannot be canceled by the bonding agent for non-payment of the premium by the applicant;

(D) Has a face value of \$1,000 or an amount equal to ten percent of the average monthly coupon redemption volume of the applicant for the immediate twelve months prior to the effective date of the most recent sanction which necessitated the bond, whichever amount is greater;

(E) Is valid at all times during which the firm is authorized to participate in the program; and

(F) Remains in the custody of the officer-in-charge unless released to the applicant as a result of the withdrawal of the applicant's authorization, without a fiscal claim established against the applicant by FNS.

(ii) Furnishing a collateral bond shall not eliminate or reduce a firm's obligation to pay in full any civil money penalty or previously determined fiscal claim which may have been assessed against the firm by FNS prior to the time the bond was required by FNS, and furnished by the firm. A firm which has been assessed a civil money penalty shall pay FNS as required, any subsequent fiscal claim asserted by FNS. In such cases a collateral bond shall be furnished to FNS with the payment, or a schedule of intended payments, of the civil money penalty. A buyer or transferee shall not, as a result of the transfer or purchase of a disqualified firm, be required to furnish a bond prior to authorization.

(5) *Taxpayer identification numbers.* At the time of an initial request for authorization as well as reauthorization, an applicant firm must provide its employer identification number and social security numbers as described below:

(i) *Employer Identification Number.* The firm must provide its employer identification number (EIN) if one has been assigned to the firm by the Internal Revenue Service. The authority to request EINs and the guidelines for requesting EINs are set forth in section 6109(f) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 and Treas. Reg. § 301.6109-2 (26 CFR 301.6109-2).

(ii) *Social Security Number.* In addition to the EIN, the firm must provide the social security numbers (SSNs) of the following individuals:

(A) The SSN of an owner of a sole proprietorship.

(B) The SSNs of general partners of firms which are partnerships.

(C) The SSNs of up to five of the largest shareholders (owners) of privately owned corporations. (For purposes of this section, a privately owned corporation is one which has shares or stock that are not traded on a stock exchange or available for purchase by the general public.)

(6) *Other factors.* Any other factors which the FNS officer in charge considers pertinent to the application under consideration.

(c) *Wholesalers.* A wholesale food concern may be authorized to accept coupons only from a specified customer or customers if it meets the requirements of paragraphs (a) and (b) of this section, and FNS determines it is required as a redemption outlet:

(1) For one or more specified authorized drug addict or alcoholic treatment programs,

(2) For one or more specified authorized group living arrangements,

(3) For one or more specified authorized shelters for battered women and children,

(4) For one or more specified authorized nonprofit cooperative food-purchasing ventures,

(5) For one or more specified authorized public or private nonprofit homeless meal providers, or

(6) For one or more specified authorized retail food stores which are without access to an insured financial institution which will redeem their coupons.

No firm may be authorized to accept and redeem coupons concurrently as both a retail food store and a wholesale food concern. Authorizations of wholesale food concerns granted prior to January 28, 1982 shall expire on May 31, 1982. Wholesale food concerns desiring to participate in the program after that date must reapply for authorization in accordance with the provisions of this paragraph.

(d) *Meal services.* A meal delivery service or communal dining facility desiring to prepare and serve meals to households eligible to use coupons for those meals in addition to meeting the requirements of paragraphs (a) and (b) of this section, must establish that:

(1) It is recognized as a tax exempt organization by the Internal Revenue Service; or

(2) It is a senior citizens' center or apartment building occupied primarily by elderly persons and SSI recipients, and their spouses; or

(3) It is a restaurant operating under a contract with a State or local agency to prepare and serve (or deliver) low-cost meals to homeless persons, elderly persons and SSI recipients (and in the case of meal delivery services, to elderly persons or handicapped persons) and their spouses. Such a facility must have more than 50 percent of its total sales in food. The contracts of restaurants must specify the approximate prices which will be charged.

(e) *Treatment programs.* Drug addict or alcoholic treatment and rehabilitation programs wishing to redeem benefits shall in addition to meeting the requirements of paragraphs (a), (b) and (d)(1) of this section, be under Part B of Title XIX of the Public Health Service Act (42 U.S.C. 300x et seq.). Approval to participate is automatically withdrawn once the treatment and rehabilitation program no longer meets the criteria which would make it eligible for funding under part B of Title XIX (in accordance with the definition in *Drug addiction or alcoholic treatment and rehabilitation program* in § 271.2).

(f) *Group living arrangements.* FNS shall authorize as retail food stores those group living arrangements wishing to redeem benefits. The group living arrangement must, in addition to meeting requirements of paragraphs (a), (b), and (d)(1) of this section, be certified by the appropriate agency or agencies of the State under regulations issued under section 1616(e) of the Social Security Act or under standards determined by the Secretary to be comparable to standards implemented by appropriate State agencies under section 1616(e) of the Social Security Act. Approval to participate is automatically cancelled at any time that a program loses its certification from the State agency or agencies.

(g) *Shelters for battered women and children.* FNS shall authorize as retail food stores those shelters for battered women and children wishing to redeem benefits. The shelter must be public or private nonprofit, as defined in paragraph (d)(1) of this section, and meet the requirements of paragraphs (a) and (b) of this section. Shelters which also serve other groups of individuals must have a portion of the facility set aside on a long-term basis to shelter battered women and children. Also required is that the shelter be a residence which serves meals or provides food to its residents.

(h) *House-to-house trade routes.* FNS shall, in consultation with the Department's Office of Inspector General, determine those locations where the operation of trade routes damages the program's integrity. FNS may limit the authorization of house-to-house trade routes to those trade routes whose services are required by participating households in such areas in order to obtain food. The FNS Officer in Charge, in deciding whether households in such areas require a trade route's services, shall consider the volume of food business the trade route does and the availability of alternate sources of comparable food. An FNS official shall inspect any applicant trade route's vehicle to ensure that the trade route is a retail food store before authorizing it to accept coupons. An FNS official may require, as a condition of continuing authorization, that the trade route vehicle be reinspected

semiannually to ensure that it continues to be a retail food store.

(i) *Private homeless meal providers.* FNS may authorize as retail food stores those restaurants which contract with the appropriate State agency to serve meals to homeless persons at "concessional" (low or reduced) prices. Restaurants shall be responsible for obtaining contracts with the appropriate State agency as defined in § 272.9 and for providing a copy of the contract to FNS at the time it applies for authorization to accept food stamp benefits. Contracts must specify the approximate prices which will be charged. Examples of reduced prices include, but are not limited to, a percentage reduction, a set dollar amount reduction, a daily special meal, or an offer of a free food item or beverage (excluding alcoholic beverages).

(j) *Authorization.* Upon approval, FNS shall issue a nontransferable authorization card to the firm. The authorization card shall be valid only for the time period for which the firm is authorized to accept and redeem food stamp benefits. The authorization card shall be retained by the firm until such time as the authorization period has ended, authorization in the program is superseded, or the card is surrendered or revoked as provided in this part. All firms will be authorized in the program for a period of 5 years. The specification of an authorization period in no way precludes FNS from periodically requesting information from a firm for purposes of reauthorization in the program or from withdrawing or terminating the authorization of a firm in accordance with this part.

(k) *Denying authorization.* FNS shall deny the application of any firm if it determines that:

(1) The firm does not qualify for participation in the program as specified in paragraph (b), (c), (d), (e), (f), (g), (h) or (i) of this section; or

(2) The firm has failed to meet the eligibility requirements for authorization under Criterion A or Criterion B, as specified in paragraph (b)(1)(i) of this section; or, for co-located wholesale/retail firms, the firm fails to meet the requirements of paragraph (b)(1)(vi) of this section. Any firm that has been denied authorization on these bases

shall not be eligible to submit a new application for authorization in the program for a minimum period of six months from the effective date of the denial;

(3) The firm has been found to lack the necessary business integrity and reputation to further the purposes of the program. Such firms shall be denied authorization in the program for the following period of time:

(i) Firms for which records of criminal conviction or civil judgment exist that reflect on the business integrity of owners, officers, or managers as stipulated in § 278.1(b)(3)(i) shall be denied authorization permanently;

(ii) Firms which have been officially removed from other Federal, State or local government programs through administrative action shall be denied for a period equivalent to the period of removal from any such programs; or, if the firm is not removed from the program, but FNS determines a pattern (3 or more instances) exists evidencing a lack of business integrity on the part of the owners, officers or managers of the firm, such firm shall be denied for a one year period effective from the date of denial;

(iii) Firms for which evidence exists of an attempt to circumvent a period of disqualification, a civil money penalty, or fine imposed for violations of the Food Stamp Act of 1977, as amended, and program regulations shall be denied for a period of three years from the effective date of denial;

(iv) Firms for which evidence exists of prior Food Stamp Program violations by owners, officers, or managers of the firm for which a sanction had not been previously imposed and satisfied shall be denied for a period of time equivalent to the appropriate disqualification period for such previous violations, effective from the date of denial;

(v) Firms for which evidence exists of prior Food Stamp Program violations at other units of multi-unit firms as specified in § 278.1(b)(3)(v) for which a sanction had not been previously imposed and satisfied shall be denied for a period of time equivalent to the appropriate disqualification period for such previous violations, effective from the date of denial;

(vi) Firms for which any other evidence exists which reflects negatively on the business integrity or business honesty of the owners, officers or managers of the firm as specified in § 278.1(b)(3)(vi) shall be denied for a period of one year from the effective date of denial;

(4) The firm has filed an application that contains false or misleading information about a substantive matter, as specified in § 278.6(e). Such firms shall be denied authorization for the periods specified in § 278.6(e)(1) or § 278.6(e)(3);

(5) The firm's participation in the program will not further the purposes of the program;

(6) The firm has been found to be circumventing a period of disqualification or a civil money penalty through a purported transfer of ownership;

(7) The firm has failed to pay in full any fiscal claim assessed against the firm under § 278.7, any fines assessed under §§ 278.6(l) or 278.6(m), or a transfer of ownership civil money penalty assessed under § 278.6(f). The FNS officer in charge shall issue a notice to the firm (using any delivery method that provides evidence of delivery) to inform the firm of any authorization denial and advise the firm that it may request review of that determination.

(l) *Withdrawing authorization.* (1) FNS shall withdraw the authorization of any firm authorized to participate in the program for any of the following reasons.

(i) The firm's continued participation in the program will not further the purposes of the program;

(ii) The firm fails to meet the specifications of paragraph (b), (c), (d), (e), (f), (g), (h), or (i) of this section;

(iii) The firm fails to meet the requirements for eligibility under Criterion A or B, as specified in paragraph (b)(1)(i) of this section; or, for co-located wholesale/retail firms, the firm fails to meet the requirements of paragraph (b)(1)(vi) of this section, for the time period specified in paragraph (k)(2) of this section;

(iv) The firm fails to maintain the necessary business integrity to further the purposes of the program, as specified in paragraph (b)(3) of this section. Such firms shall be withdrawn for lack of business integrity for periods of time

in accordance with those stipulated in paragraph (k)(3) of this section for specific business integrity findings;

(v) The firm has failed to pay in full any fiscal claim assessed against the firm under § 278.7 or any fines assessed under §§ 278.6(l) or 278.6(m) or a transfer of ownership civil money penalty assessed under § 278.6(f); or

(vi) The firm has failed to pay fines assessed under § 278.6(l) or § 278.6(m); or

(vii) The firm is required under State and/or local law to charge tax on eligible food purchased with coupons or to sequence or allocate purchases of eligible foods made with coupons and cash in a manner inconsistent with 272.1 of these regulations.

(2) The FNS officer in charge shall issue a notice to the firm by using any delivery method as long as the method provides evidence of delivery to inform the firm of the determination and of the review procedure. FNS shall remove the firm from the program if the firm does not request review within the period specified in part 279.

(m) *Refusal to accept correspondence or to respond to inquiries.* FNS may withdraw or deny the authorization of any firm which:

(1) Refuses to accept correspondence from FNS;

(2) Fails to respond to inquiries from FNS within a reasonable time; or

(3) Cannot be located by FNS with reasonable effort.

(n) *Periodic reauthorization.* At the request of FNS a retail food store or wholesale food concern will be required to undergo a periodic reauthorization determination by updating any or all of the information on the firm's application form. Failure to cooperate in the reauthorization process will result in withdrawal of the firm's approval to participate in the program.

(o) *Applications containing false information.* The filing of any application containing false or misleading information may result in the denial of approval for participation in the program, as specified in paragraph (k) of this section, or disqualification of a firm from participation in the program, as specified in § 278.6, and may subject the firm and persons responsible to civil or criminal action.

(p) *Administrative review.* Any withdrawal or denial of authorization to participate in the program shall be subject to administrative review under part 279.

(q) *Use and disclosure of information provided by firms.* With the exception of EINs and SSNs, any information collected from retail food stores and wholesale food concerns, such as ownership information and sales and redemption data, may be disclosed for purposes directly connected with the administration and enforcement of the Food Stamp Act and these regulations, and can be disclosed to and used by State agencies that administer the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). Such information may also be disclosed to and used by Federal and State law enforcement and investigative agencies for the purpose of administering or enforcing other Federal or State law, and the regulations issued under such other law. Such disclosure and use shall also include companies or individuals under contract for the operation by, or on behalf of FNS to accomplish an FNS function. Such purposes include the audit and examination of such information by the Comptroller General of the United States authorized by any other provision of law. Any person who publishes, divulges, discloses, or makes known in any manner or to any extent not authorized by Federal law or regulations any information obtained under this paragraph shall be fined not more than \$1,000 or imprisoned not more than 1 year, or both. Safeguards with respect to employee identification numbers (EINs) are contained in paragraph (q)(2) of this section. Safeguards with respect to Social Security numbers (SSNs) are contained in paragraph (q)(3) of this section.

(1) *Criteria for requesting information.* FNS shall determine what information can be disclosed and which government agencies have access to that information based on the following criteria:

(i) Federal and State law enforcement or investigative agencies or instrumentalities administering or enforcing specified Federal and State laws, or regulations issued under those laws, have access to certain informa-

tion maintained by FNS. Such agencies or instrumentalities must have among their responsibilities the enforcement of law or the investigation of suspected violations of law. However, only certain Federal entities have access to information involving SSNs and EINs in accordance with paragraph (q)(1)(ii) of this section;

(ii) Except for SSNs and EINs, information provided to FNS by applicants and authorized firms participating in the FSP may be disclosed and used by qualifying Federal and State entities in accordance with paragraph (q)(1)(i) of this section. The disclosure of SSNs and EINs is limited only to qualifying Federal agencies or instrumentalities which otherwise have access to SSNs and EINs based on law and routine use. Release of information under this paragraph shall be limited to information relevant to the administration or enforcement of the specified laws and regulations, as determined by FNS;

(iii) Requests for information must be submitted in writing, including electronic communication, and must clearly indicate the specific provision of law or regulations which would be administered or enforced by access to requested information, and the relevance of the information to those purposes. If a formal agreement exists between FNS and another agency or instrumentality, individual written requests may be unnecessary. FNS may request additional information if needed to clarify a request;

(iv) Disclosure by FNS is limited to: Information about applicant stores and concerns with applications on file; information about authorized stores participating in the FSP; and information about unauthorized entities or individuals illegally accepting or redeeming food stamps;

(v) Requests for information disclosure by FNS may involve a specific store or concern, or some or all stores and concerns covered by paragraph (q)(1)(iv) of this section. In addition, FNS may sign agreements allowing certain government entities direct access to appropriate FNS data, with access to EINs and SSNs limited only to other Federal agencies and instrumentalities that otherwise have access to such numbers.

(2) *Employer identification numbers.* (i) The Department may have access to the EINs obtained pursuant to paragraph (b)(5) of this section for the purpose of establishing and maintaining a list of the names and EINs of the stores and concerns for use in determining those applicants who previously have been sanctioned or convicted under sections 12 and 15 of the Food Stamp Act of 1977, as amended, (7 U.S.C. 2021 or 2024). The Department also may share EINs with other Federal agencies and instrumentalities that otherwise have access to EINs if the Department determines that such sharing would assist in verifying and matching such information against information maintained by such other agency or instrumentality. Any such information shared pursuant to this paragraph may be used by the Department or such other agency or instrumentality for the purpose of effective administration and enforcement of the Food Stamp Act of 1977, as amended, or for the purpose of investigating violations of other Federal laws or enforcing such laws. See Treas. Reg. § 301.6109–2 (b) and (c) (26 CFR 301.6109–2 (b) and (c)).

(ii) The only persons permitted access to EINs obtained pursuant to paragraph (b) of this section are officers and employees of the United States, who otherwise have access and whose duties or responsibilities require access to the EINs for the administration or enforcement of the Food Stamp Act of 1977, as amended, or for the purpose of investigating violations of other Federal laws or enforcing such laws. See Treas. Reg. § 301.6109–2(d)(1) (26 CFR 301.6109–2(d)(1)).

(iii) The Department or any agency or instrumentality of the United States shall provide for any additional safeguards that the Secretary of the Treasury determines to be necessary or appropriate to protect the confidentiality of the EINs. The Department may also provide for any additional safeguards to protect the confidentiality of EINs so long as these safeguards are consistent with any safeguards determined by the Secretary of the Treasury to be necessary or appropriate. See Treas. Reg. § 301.6109–2(d)(2) (26 CFR 301.6109–2(d)(2)).

(iv) EINs maintained by the Department or maintained by any agency or instrumentality of the United States pursuant to § 278.1(b)(5) are confidential. Except as provided in paragraph (q)(2)(ii) of this section above, no officer or employee of the United States who has or had access to any such EIN may disclose that number in any manner. For purposes of paragraph (q)(2)(iv) of this section the term *officer or employee* includes a former officer or employee. See Treas. Reg. § 301.6109–2(e) (26 CFR 301.6109(e)).

(v) Sections 7213(a) (1), (2) and (3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 apply with respect to the unauthorized, willful disclosure to any person of EINs obtained by the Department pursuant to § 278.1(b)(5) in the same manner and to the same extent as sections 7213(a) (1), (2) and (3) apply with respect to unauthorized disclosure of returns and return information described in those sections. Section 7213(a)(4) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 applies with respect to the willful offer of any item of material value in exchange for any EIN obtained by the Department pursuant to § 278.1(b)(5) in the same manner and to the same extent as section 7213(a)(4) applies with respect to offers (in exchange for any return or return information) described in that section. See Treas. Reg. § 301.6109–2(f) (26 CFR 301.6109–2(f)).

(3) *Social Security numbers.* (i) The Department may have access to SSNs obtained pursuant to paragraph (b)(5) of this section for the purpose of establishing and maintaining a list of names and SSNs of stores and concerns for use in determining those applicants who previously have been sanctioned or convicted under section 12 or 15 of the Food Stamp Act of 1977, as amended, (7 U.S.C. 2021 or 2024). The Department may use this determination of sanctions and convictions in administering sections 12 and 15 of the Food Stamp Act of 1977, as amended, (7 U.S.C. 2018, 2021). The Department also may share SSNs with other Federal agencies and instrumentalities if the Department determines that such sharing would assist in verifying and matching such information against information maintained by the Department or such other agency or instrumentality. Any

such information shared pursuant to this paragraph shall be used for the purpose of effective administration and enforcement of the Food Stamp Act of 1977, as amended, or for the purpose of investigating violations of other Federal laws or enforcing such laws.

(ii) The only persons permitted access to SSNs obtained pursuant to paragraph (b) of this section are officers and employees of the United States, who otherwise have access, and whose duties or responsibilities require access to the SSNs for the administration or enforcement of the Food Stamp Act of 1977, as amended, or for the purpose of investigating violations of other Federal laws or enforcing such laws. Such access shall also include companies or individuals under contract for the operation by, or on behalf of FNS to accomplish an FNS function.

(iii) The Department shall provide for all additional safeguards that the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration determines to be necessary or appropriate to protect the confidentiality of the SSNs. The Department may also provide for any additional safeguards to protect the confidentiality of SSNs so long as these safeguards are consistent with any safeguards determined by the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration to be necessary or appropriate.

(iv) The SSNs and related records that are obtained or maintained by authorized persons are confidential, and no officer or employee shall disclose any such SSN or related record except as authorized. The term "related record" means any record, list, or compilation that indicates, directly or indirectly, the identity of any individual with respect to whom a request for a SSN is maintained. For purposes of paragraph (r)(3)(iv) of this section the term "officer or employee" includes a former officer or employee.

(v) The sanctions under sections 7213(a) (1), (2) and (3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 will apply with respect to the unauthorized, willful disclosure to any person of SSNs and related records obtained or maintained in the same manner and to the same extent as sections 7213(a) (1), (2) and (3) apply with respect to unauthorized disclosures of returns and return informa-

tion described in those sections. The sanction under section 7213(a)(4) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 will apply with respect to the willful offer of any item of material value in exchange for any SSN or related record in the same manner and to the same extent as section 7213(a)(4) applies with respect to offers (in exchange for any return or return information) described in that section.

(4) *FNS initiated matches.* Under the restrictions noted in paragraph (r) of this section, FNS will periodically initiate cross matches of retailer data with other Federal and State agencies' files for the purpose of verifying information provided by applicant and participating firms, and for the purposes of administering and enforcing other Federal or State laws. Such matches could involve all firms participating after implementation for the purpose of verifying information such as, but not limited to, SSNs and retail sales data.

(r) *Public and Private Nonprofit Homeless Meal Providers.* FNS shall authorize as retail food stores, those public and private nonprofit homeless meal providers which apply and qualify for authorization to accept food stamps from homeless food stamp recipients. Such meal providers must be public or private nonprofit organizations as defined by the Internal Revenue Service (I.R.C. 501(c)(3)), must serve meals that include food purchased by the provider, must meet the requirements of paragraphs (a) and (b) of this section, and must be approved by an appropriate State or local agency, pursuant to § 272.9. Public and private nonprofit homeless meal providers shall be responsible for obtaining approval from an appropriate State or local agency and shall provide written documentation of such approval to FNS prior to approval of the meal provider's application for authorization. (If such approval is subsequently withdrawn, FNS authorization shall be withdrawn). Public and private nonprofit homeless meal providers serving meals which consist wholly of donated foods shall not be eligible for authorization. In an area in which FNS, in consultation

with the Department's Office of Inspector General, finds evidence that the authorization of a public and private non-profit homeless meal provider would damage the Food Stamp Program's integrity, FNS shall limit the participation of that public and private non-profit homeless meal provider, unless FNS determines that the establishment or shelter is the only one of its kind serving the area.

(s) Each authorized retail food store shall post in a suitable and conspicuous location in the store a sign designed and provided by FNS which provides information on how persons may report abuses they have observed in the operation of the program. Refusal or repeated failure to display such a sign by an authorized retail food store may result in the withdrawal of the firm's approval to participate in the program.

(t) *Periodic notification.* The FNS will issue periodic notification to participating retail stores and wholesale food concerns to clarify program eligibility criteria, including the definitions of "Retail food store", "Staple foods", "Eligible foods", and "Perishable foods". At a minimum, such information will be provided to stores at the time of authorization, reauthorization and upon request.

[Amdt. 136, 43 FR 43274, Sept. 22, 1978]

EDITORIAL NOTE: For FEDERAL REGISTER citations affecting § 278.1, see the List of CFR Sections Affected, which appears in the Finding Aids section of the printed volume and on GPO Access.

EFFECTIVE DATE NOTES: 1. At 61 FR 53600, Oct. 15, 1996, in § 278.1, paragraph (i) was redesignated as paragraph (j) and a new paragraph (i) was added. This paragraph contains information collection and recordkeeping requirements and will not become effective until approval has been given by the Office of Management and Budget.

2. At 73 FR 79594, Dec. 30, 2008, § 278.1 was amended by revising paragraph (b)(4), effective March 2, 2009. For the convenience of the user, the revised text is set forth as follows:

§ 278.1 Approval of retail food stores and wholesale food concerns.

* * * * *

(b) * * *

(4) *The submission of collateral bonds or irrevocable letters of credit for firms with previous*

sanctions. (i) If the applicant firm has been sanctioned for violations of this part, by withdrawal, or disqualification for a period of more than six months, or by a civil money penalty in lieu of a disqualification period of more than six months, or if the applicant firm has been previously sanctioned for violations and incurs a subsequent sanction, regardless of the disqualification period, FNS shall, as a condition of future authorization, require the applicant to present a collateral bond or irrevocable letter of credit that meets the following conditions:

(A) The collateral bond must be issued by a bonding agent/company recognized under the law of the State in which the applicant is conducting business and which is represented by a negotiable certificate only. The irrevocable letter of credit must be issued by a commercial bank;

(B) The collateral bond or irrevocable letter of credit must be made payable to the Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture;

(C) The collateral bond cannot be canceled by the bonding agent/company for non-payment of the premium by the applicant. The irrevocable letter of credit cannot be canceled by the commercial bank for non-payment by the applicant;

(D) The collateral bond or irrevocable letter of credit must have a face value of \$1,000 or an amount equal to ten percent of the average monthly food stamp benefit redemption volume of the applicant for the immediate twelve months prior to the effective date of the most recent sanction which necessitated the collateral bond or irrevocable letter of credit, whichever amount is greater;

(E) The applicant is required to submit a collateral bond or irrevocable letter of credit that is valid for a period of five years when re-entering the program; and

(F) The collateral bond or irrevocable letter of credit shall remain in the custody of FNS unless released to the applicant as a result of the withdrawal of the applicant's authorization, without a fiscal claim established against the applicant by FNS.

(ii) Furnishing a collateral bond or irrevocable letter of credit shall not eliminate or reduce a firm's obligation to pay in full any civil money penalty or previously determined fiscal claim which may have been assessed against the firm by FNS prior to the time the bond or letter of credit was required by FNS, and furnished by the firm. A firm which has been assessed a civil money penalty shall pay FNS as required, any subsequent fiscal claim asserted by FNS. In such cases a collateral bond or irrevocable letter of credit shall be furnished to FNS with the payment, or a schedule of intended payments, of the civil money penalty. A buyer

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or transferee shall not, as result of the transfer or purchase of a disqualified firm, be required to furnish a bond or letter of credit prior to authorization.

* * * * *

§ 278.2 Participation of retail food stores.

(a) *Use of coupons.* Coupons may be accepted by an authorized retail food store only from eligible households or the households' authorized representative, and only in exchange for eligible food. Coupons may not be accepted in exchange for cash, except when cash is returned as change in a transaction in which coupons were accepted in payment for eligible food under paragraph (d) of this section. Coupons may not be accepted in payment of interest on loans or for any other nonfood use. An authorized retail food store may not accept coupons from another retail food store, except that public or private nonprofit homeless meal providers may redeem coupons for eligible food through authorized retail food stores.

(b) *Equal treatment for coupon customers.* Coupons shall be accepted for eligible foods at the same prices and on the same terms and conditions applicable to cash purchases of the same foods at the same store except that tax shall not be charged on eligible foods purchased with coupons. However, nothing in this part may be construed as authorizing FNS to specify the prices at which retail food stores may sell food. However, public or private nonprofit homeless meal providers may only request *voluntary* use of food stamps from homeless food stamp recipients and may not request such household using food stamps to pay more than the average cost of the food *purchased* by the public or private nonprofit homeless meal provider contained in a meal served to the patrons of the meal service. For purposes of this section, "average cost" is determined by averaging food costs over a period of up to one calendar month. Voluntary payments by food stamp recipients in excess of such costs may be accepted by the meal providers. The value of donated foods from any source shall not be considered in determining the amount to be requested from food stamp recipients.

ents. All indirect costs, such as those incurred in the acquisition, storage, or preparation of the foods used in meals shall also be excluded. In addition, if others have the option of eating free or making a monetary donation, food stamp recipients must be provided the same option of eating free or making a donation in money or food stamps. No retail food store may single out coupon users for special treatment in any way.

(c) *Accepting coupons.* No authorized retail food store may accept coupons marked "paid," "canceled," or "specimen." Nor may a retail food store accept coupons bearing any cancellation or endorsement, or coupons of other than the 1-dollar denomination which have been detached from the coupon books prior to the time of purchase or delivery of eligible food unless the detached coupons are accompanied by the coupon books which bear the same serial numbers that appear on the detached coupons. However, in the case of public or private nonprofit homeless meal providers, retail food stores may accept detached coupons which have been accepted by the homeless meal provider. It is the right of the household member or the authorized representative to detach the coupons from the book.

(d) *Making change.* An authorized retail food store shall use, for the purpose of making change, uncanceled and unmarked 1-dollar coupons which were previously accepted for eligible foods. If change in an amount of less than 1-dollar is required, the eligible household shall receive the change in cash. However, in the case of public or private nonprofit homeless meal providers, neither cash change nor credit slips shall be provided under any circumstances when food stamps are used to purchase meals. At no time may cash change in excess of 99 cents be returned in a coupon transaction. An authorized retail food store may not engage in a series of coupon transactions the purpose of which is to provide the same food stamp customer an amount of cash change greater than the maximum 99 cents cash change allowed in one transaction.

(e) *Accepting coupons before delivery.* Food retailers may not accept coupons